

PARTIES' PROGRESS: THE DISTRICT COUNCIL

ELECTIONS OF MAY 1980*

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The third round of elections to Scottish District Councils took place on May 1st 1980. In this chapter we present first of all a relatively straightforward analysis of the results of these elections comparing them with the previous District elections of 1974 and 1977. We then go on to look more specifically at the increasingly important role of political parties in Scottish local government.

II

In this section we consider four topics of interest - contests, candidatures, turnout and the distribution of votes and seats. At the outset it should be noted that between 1977 and 1980 ward boundaries were revised in 20 of the 53 Scottish Districts. These were Caithness, Sutherland, Skye and Lochalsh, Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey, Nairn, North-East Fife, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Clackmannan, Stirling, Falkirk, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, Berwickshire, Cunninghame, Wigtown, Stewartry, Nithsdale and Annandale and Eskdale. It is anticipated that the remaining Districts will have their ward boundaries redrawn before the next elections in 1984. The changes since the last elections do not inhibit District by District comparisons but they do

*This Chapter is based on the results of the District elections as published in The Scotsman newspaper, and should be regarded as a preliminary analysis. A comprehensive analysis and compilation of results appears in The Scottish District Elections 1980, published by the authors.

mean that in those cases where we wish to carry out ward-level analysis the number of comparable wards is smaller than has been the case hitherto.

Contests and Their Absence

Elections are a key mechanism in democratic societies enabling the electors to express their preferences for a particular representative or party and thus, indirectly, for an administration. When candidates are returned without a contest the purpose of elections is, to an extent, frustrated. It is worth considering briefly how the phenomenon of uncontested elections arises.

There are three main possible causes. First of all the incumbent or nominee may, through his performance and potential, satisfy every single elector. In these circumstances the purpose of elections is not frustrated - but we doubt whether any such cases exist. Secondly it may be believed by potential rivals that the incumbent or nominee is bound to win. Certainly there are good grounds in many areas for thinking this. In local as in general elections most seats are safe for one party or another. And if we look at the seats which were left uncontested in one election but contested in the succeeding one, then between 1974 and 1977 the incumbent party retained the seat in 81% of cases, while between 1977 and 1980, in comparable wards, the same was true in 78% of cases. This still leaves, however, a significant number of occasions in which a seat, having been left uncontested at one election, changed hands after a contest in the next. Finally, individuals may not come forward as candidates because the costs may outweigh the benefits for them. By costs here we mean not only the effort involved in campaigning, but also the costs in time, income, energy and career prospects in being a councillor. This sort of reasoning explains why in some wards (four in this election) no candidates at all are nominated and why in others which parties wish to fight they are unable to find anyone willing to stand.

Parties and party members do, however, have incentives to contest elections which individual non-party people do not have. By forcing a contest which they may not expect to win they can test their levels of support for parliamentary purposes, tie down their

opponents' resources, exercise their electoral 'machine' and so on. It is this that explains why the proportion of district wards which have been contested since the reorganisation of Scottish local government has been relatively large - the figures are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Proportion of District Wards Contested

<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
%.	%	%
79.5	77.9	74.0

Although there is a small reduction in the proportion of wards contested over the series of elections, this is entirely due to a decline in those areas where political party activity is weakest. We shall return to this subject below, but for the moment we simply need to note that if we consider the data for the Highland, Grampian, Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Regions then the proportion of District seats contested in these has declined consistently from 57.5% in 1974 to 54.5% in 1977 and 40.8% in 1980, while in the other five more partisan Regions, the figures have remained stable at 89.4%, 88.4% and 89.1% respectively. It would seem then that the main cause of uncontested elections in Scottish Districts is the unwillingness or inability of parties to get involved in the peripheral regions and the fact that in these regions the attractions of council office for non-party people are not great enough to outweigh the costs involved.

Table 2 shows the distribution of uncontested seats amongst the parties at the three elections that have been held so far. In each case Independents account for more than half of uncontested wins and most of these are in non-partisan Districts. Parties are rather less inclined to allow their opponents a free run, but the perceived 'unbeatability' of Labour in some districts clearly disheartens opponents and results in Labour having the largest number of uncontested returns amongst the parties.

Table 2
Winning Party in Uncontested Divisions

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Con	23	41	29
Lab	73	42	63
Lib	1	3	5
SNP	4	7	5
Ind	122	154	173
Others	-	-	2
TOTAL	223	247	277

Candidatures

Table 3 shows the number of candidates for each party at each District election. The 1980 elections witnessed, broadly, a continuation of the trends found in the first two elections. As before, Labour put forward the greatest number of candidates, 768, this being a record number. The Conservatives once again recorded a small increase

Table 3

Candidates

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Con	539	543	556
Lab	753	719	768
Lib	148	136	151
SNP	269	465	442
Comm	128	90	60
Ind	644	521	422
Others	79	97	51
TOTAL	2,559	2,560	2,450

in the number of candidates nominated while the number of Independents and Communists continued to decline. The SNP managed to maintain their candidatures at about the same level as 1977, but the Liberals increased to their highest number so far.

Turnout

The level of turnout at elections is often interpreted as a measure

of the amount of interest and concern among electors, the energy and efficiency of candidates and parties and so on. Whatever it indicates, however, voting is almost universally considered to be 'a good thing' and low turnouts are deplored by public officials, politicians and political commentators. From this point of view the 1980 District elections were a disappointment in that there was a further slight fall in electoral participation. As Table 4 shows turnout has declined in successive elections since the (relatively) high point of 1974 when the newly-created authorities were first elected. It should be remembered, though, that these figures still represent a much greater

Table 4

Turnout in District Elections

<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
%	%	%
51.4	47.8	45.4

number of people voting than was the case under the old local government system when very many more seats were left uncontested, especially in rural areas.

There was, of course, considerable variation in turnout at District level. On the one hand six Districts had turnouts below 40% (Banff and Buchan, Gordon, Aberdeen; Perth and Kinross, Roxburgh and Annandale and Eskdale) while on the other hand four had turnouts over 55% - but all of these were very small Districts where only a few seats were contested (Sutherland, Skye and Lochalsh, Badenoch and Strathspey and Tweeddale).

There was also some variation in turnout changes between 1977 and 1980. While overall turnout declined by 2.4%, there was an increase in the three northern Regions of Highland (+2.0%), Grampian (+1.7%) and Tayside (+1.8%). The remaining six Regions showed decreases - Fife (-3.8%), Lothian (-2.4%), Central (-4.5%), Borders (-0.4%), Strathclyde (-3.5%) and Dumfries and Galloway (-2.2%). It is not clear at this stage why there was this difference between the North and South of the country.

Despite these changes, the pattern of turnout across Districts remained similar to that of the first two elections. There was a corre-

lation of .71 (Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient) between District turnouts in 1974 and 1977 while between 1977 and 1980 the relationship was a little stronger, the correlation coefficient being .75. Clearly a pattern has been established where some Districts are consistently low turnout areas while others regularly produce higher turnouts. A whole variety of factors may explain this - the competitiveness of the District, the relative organisational strength of parties, social and cultural factors and so on. We do not have space to pursue these questions here but it is a topic we hope to explore in another paper.

Votes and Seats

In some ways our discussion so far could be said to be of largely academic concern. For most people the real interest in elections is in the votes received and seats won by the parties. In advance of the 1980 elections it was possible to make fairly good guesses about the likely outcome in this respect. In 1977 Labour was in office nationally and the government was somewhat unpopular; the April Gallup Poll gave the Conservatives nationally a lead of 15.5% over Labour. In 1980, however, the Conservatives were in office and it was widely expected that they would in their turn suffer from the well-known phenomenon whereby the party in office nationally loses support in local elections. In addition, in 1977 the SNP had been riding high in popularity in Scotland. In May of that year the Scottish System Three poll gave them 35% of vote intentions in Scotland. From that date, however, the popularity of the SNP began to decline. They did not do well in parliamentary by-elections, were disappointed by the Regional elections of 1978 and their General Election vote slumped to 17% in May 1979. By April 1980 System Three was giving the SNP only 14% of the Scottish Vote. The scene was therefore set for Labour gains and Conservative and SNP losses in the 1980 District elections and that is precisely what happened.

The distribution of the vote in Scottish District elections was as shown in Table 5.

Intpretation of these data is not straightforward. In the first place they take no account of unopposed returns and where a candidate

Table 5
Party Shares of Vote

	1974	1977	1980	Change 1977-80
	%	%	%	%
Con	26.8	27.2	24.3	-2.9
Lab	38.4	31.6	45.5	+13.9
Lib	5.0	4.0	6.1	+2.1
SNP	12.4	24.2	15.5	-8.7
Comm	1.0	0.7	0.6	-0.1
Ind	14.1	9.8	6.4	-3.4
Others	2.4	2.6	1.7	-0.9

is unopposed his party is, in a sense, denied the votes that would otherwise have accrued to it. Secondly, variations in candidatures produce distortions in the figures. As we have seen, for example, the number of Independent candidates has been steadily declining and this alone would be expected to result in a decreased vote for Independents.

Despite these problems, the results of the 1980 elections are pretty clear. Although they put forward more candidates, the Conservatives' share of the vote dropped by almost 3%. This is not, perhaps as great as might have been expected and certainly contrasts favourably with the near 9% drop experienced by the SNP. Independents continued to lose support. On the other hand the Liberals made a small advance and Labour emerged with a gain of almost 14% compared with 1977, achieving 45.5% of the votes cast, their highest yet, and more than 20% ahead of their nearest rivals. The electoral dominance of Labour in Scotland could hardly be more conclusively demonstrated. Even if the 1979 General Election is taken as the point of comparison, when Labour did well in Scotland, the District elections saw a swing of 5.5% from Conservative to Labour on these figures.

It must be emphasised however that these gross figures are subject to distortions. It is therefore worth-while looking in more detail at the data.

If we consider first the decline in Independents' share of the vote. This is to a considerable extent accounted for by the decreased number of Independent candidates, the increasing frequency of uncontest-

ed returns in non-partisan areas where, of course, Independents obtain most of their votes and also the lower levels of turnouts in these same areas. It does seem to be the case, however, that the decline of Independents is also partly a consequence of the preferences of electors for party candidates. In wards in which in successive elections Independents were opposed by candidates of one or more of the major parties the Independent share of the total vote fell by 5.0% between 1974 and 1977 (74 comparable wards) and by 12.6% between 1977 and 1980 (31 comparable wards).

Turning now to the Liberal Party. Table 5 shows that the Liberals obtained 6.1% of the total votes in 1980 - their highest poll to date. But they also had more candidates than ever and so we must try to take account of this in order to see whether there was a 'genuine' recovery by the Liberals. The analysis here is inhibited by boundary changes, especially in Edinburgh where there have been a significant number of Liberal candidates. Considering only those Districts where boundaries were unchanged, however, there were 129 wards which the Liberals contested in either 1977 or 1980 or both. The changed pattern of candidatures between the two elections did bring the Liberals some benefits. While they had polled 6,120 votes in the 30 wards which they contested in 1977 but not in 1980, they obtained 13,282 votes in the 33 wards contested only in 1980, a 'net gain' of about 6,500 votes. But in seats contested on both occasions (66 wards) the Liberals increased their votes from 37,659 to 48,758 - an increase of almost 30%.

When we turn to the three major parties in Scotland - Labour, the Conservatives and the SNP - there are enough wards which are comparable between 1977 and 1980 to examine the relative performances of the parties in some detail and in this way take account of varying numbers of candidates. First of all there were 78 wards which were contested in both elections by the Conservatives and Labour only of the four main parties. In these, the shares of the votes obtained by the parties were as follows:-

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	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%
Con	54.8	41.4
Lab	45.2	58.6

Clearly the overall figures given in Table 5 understate to some extent the decline of the Conservatives relative to Labour. In directly comparable wards Labour achieved a swing of 13.4%.

In the 71 wards which only the three major parties contested in both 1977 and 1980 the results were as follows:-

	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%
Con	30.5	24.1
Lab	33.0	52.4
SNP	36.5	23.4

Here the Conservative to Labour swing, 12.9%, was of the same order as the two-party case. These data show that lower SNP support was not a result of a reduced number of candidates. Their share of the vote fell by 13.1% - more than double the decline experienced by the Conservatives and the SNP to Labour swing was 16.3%.

Finally we consider straight Labour-SNP contests. Fifty-two wards can be used for this analysis and their results were as follows:-

	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%
Lab	49.3	65.8
SNP	50.7	34.2

The SNP actually won a majority of votes in these wards in 1977 but three years later they obtained only just over one third, giving a swing to Labour of 16.5% which is remarkably close to the swing in three-party contests.

Given the overall performances of the Conservatives and the SNP, straight fights between these two parties might be viewed as unpopularity contests. There were in fact only seven comparable cases of this kind but it is interesting to note that in them the SNP proved to be marginally less unpopular, increasing their share of the two-party vote by 2%.

To sum up, then, on the votes cast at the 1980 elections we can

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say that there was a further reduction in support for Independent candidates, a slight revival by the Liberals and, as might have been predicted beforehand major movements from the Conservatives and SNP to the Labour Party.

Parties and candidates do not, of course, contest elections in order to allow commentators to analyse changes in voting support. Their primary purpose is to seek to win seats in order to control the affairs of local areas and to implement their own policies. What, then were the results in terms of seats won of the electoral changes we have described coupled with unopposed returns? Table 6 shows the total number of seats won by the various parties and groups in the three sets of District elections that have been held so far. In 1980 Labour advanced well beyond their 1974 performance, while the Conservatives

Table 6

	<u>District Council Seats Won</u>		
	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Con	241	277	230
Lab	428	299	495
Lib	17	31	38
SNP	62	170	58
Ind	345	318	282
Others	17	22	19
TOTAL	1,110	1,117	1,122

and the SNP slipped back to a position which is slightly worse than 1974. The Liberals' progress was only modest, but Independents continued to decline. The SNP would have some justification for being aggrieved at the way in which the electoral system has worked against them on this occasion. If we exclude Independents (since many Independent seats were uncontested and the electorate in contested ones is very small) then the SNP took 16.5% of the non-Independent vote but only 6.9% of the non-Independent seats. By contrast both Labour and Conservatives obtained greater proportions of these seats than they did of votes. Newspaper commentators tend to concentrate upon seats won and lost rather than votes and for this reason may have exaggerated the extent of the SNP's set-back. As we have seen, in terms of

share of the votes received the SNP still remain a considerable electoral force in Scotland.

By discussing seats won in this general way we could again be accused of being academic. In terms of practical politics what matters is how these changes work out at the level of individual authorities, the pattern of party control. Accordingly we present in Table 7 a complete list of Scottish Districts summarising the outcome of each election. Where a party or group had an absolute majority of seats it is printed in capital letters. Otherwise we indicate the party which had the largest number of seats in lower case. Excluding the Independent Districts only nine of the Scottish Districts have had the same party in overall control since the new local authorities were created. On the Conservative side there are four - Perth and Kinross, North East Fife, Berwickshire and Eastwood, while Labour have consistently controlled Dunfermline, East Lothian, Monklands, Motherwell and Cumnock and Doon Valley. In addition to retaining these five Districts in 1980, Labour regained eleven Districts which they had held in 1974 but let slip in 1977. They also gained overall control of four districts where previously their best position had been that of largest party - Dundee, Falkirk, Clydebank and Strathkelvin - and took four Districts where they had never before even been the largest party - Clackmannan, Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, East Kilbride and Kyle and Carrick. Thus after the 1980 elections Labour had clear control of 24 Districts which contained about 66% of the Scottish electorate, Independents controlled 19 (13% of the Scottish electorate) and the Conservatives 5 (6% of the Scottish electorate). In the remaining five Districts no single party had overall control. The full results for each District are given in the reference section of this book.

Table 7

	<u>Control of Scottish Districts *</u>		
<u>Highland Region</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Caithness	IND	IND	IND
Sutherland	IND	IND	IND

* Party or group with absolute majority of seats printed in capital letters. Party with largest number of seats, but not absolute majority, printed in lower case.

<u>Highland Region</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Ross and Cromarty	IND	IND	IND
Skye and Lochalsh	IND	IND	IND
Lochaber	IND	IND	IND
Inverness	IND	IND	IND
Badenoch and Strathspey	IND	IND	IND
Nairn	IND	IND	IND
<u>Grampian Region</u>			
Moray	IND	IND	IND
Banff and Buchan	IND	IND	IND
Gordon	ind	IND	IND
City of Aberdeen	LAB	lab	LAB
Kincardine and Deeside	IND	IND	IND
<u>Tayside Region</u>			
Angus	ind	CON	con
City of Dundee	lab	con	LAB
Perth and Kinross	CON	CON	CON
<u>Fife Region</u>			
Kirkcaldy	LAB	lab	LAB
North East Fife	CON	CON	CON
Dunfermline	LAB	LAB	LAB
<u>Lothian Region</u>			
West Lothian	LAB	lab/snp	LAB
City of Edinburgh	con	CON	con
Midlothian	LAB	lab	LAB
East Lothian	LAB	LAB	LAB
<u>Central Region</u>			
Clackmannan	snp	SNP	LAB
Stirling	con	con	lab
Falkirk	lab	SNP	LAB
<u>Borders Region</u>			
Tweeddale	IND	IND	IND
Ettrick and Lauderdale	IND	IND	IND
Roxburgh	IND	IND	IND
Berwickshire	CON	CON	CON
<u>Strathclyde Region</u>			
Argyll and Bute	IND	IND	IND
Dumbarton	LAB	con	LAB
City of Glasgow	LAB	lab	LAB
Clydebank	lab	snp	LAB
Bearsden and Milngavie	con	CON	CON

* Party or group with absolute majority of seats printed in capital letters. Party with largest number of seats, but not absolute majority, printed in lower case.

<u>Strathclyde Region</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
Strathkelvin	lab	snp	LAB
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	SNP	SNP	LAB
Monklands	LAB	LAB	LAB
Motherwell	LAB	LAB	LAB
Hamilton	LAB	lab	LAB
East Kilbride	snp	SNP	LAB
Eastwood	CON	CON	CON
Lanark	ind	ind	lab/ind
Renfrew	LAB	lab	LAB
Inverclyde	LAB	LIT	LAB
Cunninghame	LAB	snp	LAB
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	LAB	lab/con	LAB
Kyle and Carrick	CON	CON	LAB
Cumnock and Doon Valley	LAB	LAB	LAB
<u>Dumfries and Galloway Region</u>			
Wigtown	IND	IND	IND
Stewartry	IND	IND	IND
Nithsdale	IND	IND	ind
Annandale and Eskdale	IND	IND	IND

* Party of group with absolute majority of seats printed in capital letters. Party with largest number of seats, but not absolute majority, printed in lower case.

III

In previous analyses of Scottish local election results we have discussed Scottish local government in the light of two competing models of local politics - a 'party government' model and a 'consensus politics' model. On the basis of the first two sets of elections we sought to locate Scottish Districts on an imaginary continuum running from purely non-partisan to purely partisan local politics. Our analysis suggested that Scottish Districts could be divided into three main groups.

Twenty-seven Districts were firmly partisan, 16 were non-partisan and 10 could be said to be intermediate. Does the third set of elections suggest any amendments to this categorisation? Table 8 reports the parties' progress in each of these three categories of Districts by showing the percentage of candidates who were Independents, the percentage of seats Independents won and the Independents' share of the total vote.

We have given this table (and the chapter as a whole) the title 'Parties' Progress' because the clear message of the table is that

Table 8

Parties' ProgressPartisan Districts

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%	%
% candidates Ind	6.6	4.0	3.1
% seats Ind	5.4	3.3	2.3
% votes Ind	5.2	3.0	1.9

Intermediate Districts

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%	%
% candidates Ind	41.4	34.4	24.6
% seats Ind	47.3	39.8	32.9
% votes Ind	35.6	25.9	15.3

Non-Partisan Districts

	<u>1974</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1980</u>
	%	%	%
% candidates Ind	84.7	85.1	79.9
% seats Ind	93.1	91.6	84.8
% votes Ind	82.9	82.0	68.5

Independents have continued to be squeezed out of local government in Scotland. In the 27 partisan Districts the 1980 elections saw Independents further reduced from their already weak position of 1977. The last elections also saw for the first time a significant weakening of Independent strength in the formerly solidly non-partisan Districts. For the first time the proportion of Independent seats was less than 90% while the share of the votes Independents received fell from 82% to 68.5%. In these Districts the most significant inroads by the parties were made in Inverness and Banff and Buchan.

But it is in Districts originally classified as 'intermediate' that the decline of Independents is most spectacular. Whereas in 1974 they held almost half of the seats in these Districts, by 1980 this has declined to fewer than one-third and there are parallel declines in candidatures and votes gained. On the basis of the 1980 elections it would seem that five Districts can now be said to have moved from an intermediate position to partisan politics - Angus, Perth and Kinross, North East Fife, Berwickshire, and Bearsden and Milngavie.

On the other hand, the decline of the SNP has left Nairn firmly in the hands of Independents and so this District is now best considered as non-partisan. From the original non-partisan Districts Inverness, Banff and Buchan and Roxburgh seem to have moved into the intermediate category.

The effect of this upon our classification of Districts is that there are now only 14 Districts that can be described as non-partisan - Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Cromarty, Skye and Lochalsh, Badenoch and Strathspey and Nairn in the Highland Region; Moray and Kincardine and Deeside in Grampian Region; Tweeddale and Ettrick and Lauderdale in the Borders; Argyll and Bute in Strathclyde and Wigtown, Stewartry and Annandale and Eskdale in Dumfries and Galloway. Together these constitute only 8.5% of the Scottish electorate. Seven Districts, comprising 7.1% of the Scottish electorate can now be classed as 'intermediate' in their forms of local politics - Lochaber, Inverness, Gordon, Banff and Buchan, Roxburgh, Lanark and Nithsdale. The remaining 32 Districts now have partisan local politics and they contain 84.4% of the Scottish electorate.

This increased politicisation of local government was, to an extent, predictable given the structural changes made in the local government system in 1974. It is, however, something that is frequently deplored by editors of local newspapers and 'men-in-the-street'. The choice is, however, one that is ultimately made by the electors. By their actions (or inaction) in becoming candidates and in voting they seem increasingly to prefer a party system at local level. They would appear to accept the view that when local authorities are large in terms of population and/or area then local democracy depends upon a party system in which parties simplify and structure the set of choices presented to the voters, carry out on their behalf the task of making local policy and regulating the work of local officials while being kept responsive by regular elections.

Partisan districts do have higher levels of electoral participation and much greater competition for seats. In the 1980 elections, 74% of seats in Districts now classified as non-partisan were uncontested compared with 50% in intermediate Districts and 10% in partisan Districts. But somewhat paradoxically, increased politicisation at

local level may also be said to weaken local democracy. It seems clear that local elections are not verdicts upon the tenure of office of local parties, do not act as mechanisms for making them responsive. Increasingly they constitute verdicts upon the government in office at national level. There are some local variations but on the whole local elections display nation-wide electoral movements across all local authorities no matter which party has been in office locally and no matter whether its term has been marked by successes or disasters. Thus in 1980 all of the 32 partisan Districts except Angus showed a swing from Conservative to Labour and only Angus and North East Fife had swings from Labour to SNP. When it is remembered that the pattern of candidature from one election to the next can distort the voting figures (and this is what explains the results in Angus and North-East Fife) the uniformity of the movement across Districts is striking. Somewhat depressingly for local parties and councillors their chances of re-election in 1984 will depend not upon their own efforts, or their record in office but on the popularity of the government of the day and the reactions of the electorate to national issues, events and personalities.